

1917: The Etaples mutiny

A short history of one of the early big mutinies of British troops in Europe as World War I came to an end.

Etaples, about 15 miles south of Boulogne, was a notorious British Army base camp for those on their way to the front. Under atrocious conditions both raw recruits from England and battle-weary veterans were subjected to intensive training in gas warfare, bayonet drill, and long sessions of marching at the double across the dunes. After two weeks at Etaples many of the wounded were only too glad to return to the front with unhealed wounds. Conditions in the hospital were punitive rather than therapeutic and there had been incidents at the hospital between military police and patients.

Matters came to a head one Sunday afternoon (September 9, 1917) after the arrest of a gunner in the New Zealand Artillery. A large crowd of angry men gathered and did not disperse even when told the gunner had been released. It was clear that the protest over the arrest was only the tip of an iceberg and the atmosphere was tense. The arrival of military police only made matters worse and scuffles broke out. Suddenly the sound of shooting was heard. Private H. Reeve, a military policeman, had fired into the crowd killing a corporal and wounding a French woman bystander. (1) News of the shooting spread quickly. By 7.30 pm over a thousand angry men were pursuing the military police who fled in the direction of the town. The Camp Adjutant describes how the men 'swarmed into the town, raided the office of the Base Commandant, pulled him out of his chair and carried him on their shoulders through the town.' (2)

The following morning measures were taken to prevent further outbreaks and police pickets were stationed on the bridges leading into the town. Nevertheless, by 4 pm men had broken through the pickets and were holding meetings in the town, followed by sporadic demonstrations around the camp. On Tuesday, fearing further outbreaks, the Base Commandant requested reinforcements. Meanwhile, the demonstrations gathered momentum. On Wednesday, September 12, in spite of orders confining them to camp, over a thousand men broke out, marched through the town and then on to Paris Plage. Later that day reinforcements of 400 officers and men of the Honourable Artillery Company (HAC) arrived, armed with wooden staves. A more sinister presence was cavalry support from the 15th Hussars and a section of the Machine Gun Squadron. The threat worked: only 300 men broke camp and were arrested at Etaples. The incident was now over and the reinforcements were dispersed. (3)

If shooting had broken out who knows what the effect would have been on the rest of the British army in France, particularly at a time when the French army was itself in such trouble? Moreover, at Etaples, the authorities could not rely on New Zealand troops to shoot down Scottish demonstrators with whom they had close loyalties. And a cavalry attack on unarmed men might have provoked a strong reaction. In the event the authorities were able to manage with the HAC. (4)

Not all mutinies that year ended as peacefully. On September 5, only a few days before the outbreak at Etaples, two companies went on strike at Boulogne. The following day they tried to break out of camp and although unarmed they were shot down. Twenty three were killed and twenty four wounded. (5) Yet despite such harsh reprisals within four days Number 74 Labour Company also struck. The authorities responded on September 11 by killing four men, wounding fifteen, and inflicting prison sentences on twenty five more. (6) Only a month later a similar dispute took place in the First Army Area, where five men were killed and fourteen wounded. Many other strikes in the Labour Corps were similarly 'overcome', but

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casualty lists are not recorded. We know that in December 1917 a Guards detachment opened fire on strikers of No. 21 Labour Company at Fontinettes, near Calais, killing four and wounding nine. 'Despite such rebuffs', say Gill and Dallas, 'strikes amongst labour companies continued to occur'. (7)

The severity of the repression can be explained by the fact that these particular mutineers were Chinese or Egyptians whose treatment was determined by the colour of their skins. Not every mutiny was put down by a display of superior strength. This was due to one of the fundamental paradoxes of a rigidly disciplined organisation, in wartime, of which the authorities were well aware. Once men reach the point where death is familiar, fear of death has less effect. There were other restrictions on the decision to shoot: draconian methods could

themselves provoke further trouble.

So whilst 'native' labour troops continued to be subdued by shooting, reforms were instituted to try to prevent further outbreaks at Etaples. The system of training was virtually abandoned.

Thousands came to believe that the Etaples mutiny 'changed the whole phase of routine and

"bull" from Base to Front Line'. (8)

There was a rumour that 'ringleaders of the Etaples mutiny were later shot'. (9) But we have no concrete evidence to corroborate this. Official policy was flexible. 'Men responsible for organising disaffection on a far larger scale the following winter' say Gill and Dallas, 'in both France and the Middle East, escaped without punishment at all, so threatening were the number and temper of the troops who backed them up. Equally, unfortunates who ran away from the trenches, if only for a day, were very often shot.' (10) Whatever steps the authorities took they did not stop the rising tide of mutinies which continued throughout 1918, reaching a peak in the winter of 1918-1919. Sometimes the anger of the mutineers broke into full-scale riots, as on the night of December 9-10, 1918 'when men of the Royal Artillery stationed at Le Havre Base burnt down several depots in a riot which, in its destructiveness, outweighed anything which Etaples base had seen.' (11) Taken from Mutinies by Dave Lamb

Footnotes

1. Gill and Dallas, op. cit., p.92

2. Quoted by Gill and Dallas, *ibid.* , p. 92

3. See Gill and Dallas, op. cit. , who draw attention to an affinity between the undisciplined Anzacs and the fiercely disciplined Scottish troops. The initial rioting on Sunday was sparked off by Anzac troops, contemptuous of the narrow discipline of the British Army and its social distinctions between officers and men.

4. According to Gill and Dallas the HAC detachment was composed mainly of officers and

'was the one unit on which complete reliance could be placed. Drawn from every section of society save from the working classes, the cadets were certain to stand firm. ' (op. cit. , p.

105)

5. Gill and Dallas, *ibid.*, p. 102

6. *Ibid.*, p. 102

7. *Ibid.* , p. 103. By 1918 there were some 200,000 men in the Chinese Labour Corps alone.

They worked on building, road-making, even in factories. There was substantial syndicalist influence amongst them and they formed several unions. Between 1916 and 1918 they were involved in at least 25 strikes. Since the men were under military discipline these strikes in themselves constituted mutiny.

After the war, Labour Corps returnees had a profound effect in China itself. In Shanghai there was a syndicalist group called the Chinese Wartime Labourers Corps. In Canton, returnees created 26 new unions regarded as the 'first modern unions in China'. (See Nohara Shiro,

'Anarchism and the May 4th Movement', *Libero International* No. 3, November 1975). An interesting example of how ideas cross frontiers.

8. Quoted from a letter. Gill and Dallas, *op. cit.*, p. 106

9. *Ibid.* , p. 111

10. *Ibid.*, p. 111

11. *Ibid.*, p. 112